Interview with Mark Higgins, afc2016037_04001
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Interviewed by Sarah Bryan at Hall-Wynne Funeral Home in Durham, North Carolina, for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

[Checking recording]

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you to introduce yourself for the recording.

Mark Higgins: Yes. I'm Mark Higgins. I'm the principle owner of Hall-Wynne Funeral Service in Durham, North Carolina. I also own a funeral home in nearby Oxford, North Carolina, and I've been here in Durham since 1992.

SB: Before that, where were you?

MH: I was in Evanston, Illinois, and I was the marketing director for an organization called National Selected Morticians, which has funeral home members—they're actually international, but mainly in North America.

SB: And how did you come to the profession?

MH: Ah, I began working for a small funeral home in a town in western Michigan, where I went to college, and they hired college students to run the ambulance service that they had on the side. And so I got a part-time gig doing that, and then that exposed me to the funeral service profession, and I found myself being very drawn to it, and imagining that this is work that I could one day do. And so then I pursued that, and after college I went to mortuary school, served an internship, and worked for a couple years as a funeral director prior to taking the job with the association—ultimately wanting to own my own business, which brought me to Durham in 1992.

SB: What was it about the funerals that drew you, what interested you?

MH: You know, the first— I tell the story, as I have in a couple, in writing, essays, that the first body I ever saw prepared was a teenage boy who shot himself. And that might have repulsed most people, but there was something about that experience that made me want to do something about that. I didn't know what that something was, but I felt as though I wanted to walk up to those parents and put my arms around them, or do something to some way salve their pain. So I immediately latched on to this for the opportunity to stand with people, and show up, and be around them and to be supportive and to guide them during a difficult time. And at the same time, I recognized that it was a profession that entailed many different disciplines. There's certainly a bit of theater in funeral directing; science and public health; the technical aspect of preparing the body and restoring the body's appearance; the business side of

it; and certainly the interpersonal counseling, helping role that we are granted—which is a great privilege.

SB: Which are the most important of those qualities, do you find?

MH: Well, for me, what gives me the greatest satisfaction is helping people that walk in the door who don't want to be here. Basically, if you want to drill it down to what it is, they're having to spend money to make a purchase of something that they don't want to buy. And that is a funeral service of some type for a loved one. And so, to take people who come in and they're not sure who you are, what your intentions are, that—to build a relationship with them and to foster trust, and in the end for them to say to you, "You made such a big difference in our lives. I'll never forget what you did." That's worth more than—money can't buy that. And so that for me is what continues to motivate me, and gives me an incredible sense of meaning, and the sublime nature of this work. So.

SB: Before that initial—the young man that you had worked with—had you had losses in your family? Had you experienced grief?

MH: No, not really. I had gone to— Minimally. I had attended the funeral of a Sunday school teacher's husband who was killed in a wreck, when I was age 11, and I watched everything that took place. I was very tuned-in and observant. And so I paid attention to what a funeral was about, who the people were that were doing this thing, and all the nuances—how people dressed, how people behaved, how they spoke to one another—and none of it was lost on me. So I think that really had perhaps a subconscious influence on my career decision.

SB: I'm sorry, this would have been in Evanston, is that right?

MH: Yes.

SB: How—this is a real broad question, but how, over the years of your career, have you seen funerals and funeral traditions change?

MH: [Laughs] They've changed a lot. Probably the one that most laypeople would recognize is a cremation. And I hear all the time, "My, there's certainly a lot more openness toward cremation today," and people are not conducting or not choosing the sort of typical—especially in the Southeast—the typical sort of white Protestant funeral—which is, somebody dies on a Monday, the family gathers on Tuesday for the wake, visitation, the funeral and burial are the next day. It's no longer predictable. People are more mobile and are coming in from other places, and so, with our busy lives, we're changing the patterns. I think that's where cremation has stepped in, where people can have the body sort of taken care of, and then schedule a service at a

convenient time for others to gather. I think that part of the cremation trend is, quite frankly, that— Well, there are a couple things to recognize. Cremation, in and of itself, from my vantage point, is a very good option. And I'm not opposed to it. What's more troubling are the people who choose cremation as not an alternative to the burial, per se, but an alternative to all that bother—that they're choosing it as a way of perhaps not facing up to the death. There's a bit of denial that goes into this, I think, that's also held up by this idea of "We want to celebrate the life, we don't want anything that looks like death, let's give a party, let's make it happy." Uh, but for, over the millennia, the human species has coped with and faced death by, first and foremost, dealing with the thing itself—dealing with the dead body. And that's where we come in, is to, hopefully, help people do this very human thing of disposing of their dead loved one, but to do it humanely. And so, while cremation is a very good alternative or option for people, particularly those who are not from the community where we are, and don't have any ties to the land, this allows portability and many other factors. I've been an advocate for the essential obligation that the living have, to take the dead somewhere, and to do it not in any kind of perfunctory way but to do it with ceremony, and with ritual. And if they're going to bury them, go to the hole and watch the dirt go in the grave. If they're going to burn them, go to the fire and stand there and say goodbye. Because this is the moment when the chips are down, and it's a moment that we need to, as humans, face, and come to terms with the fact that death is a part of life, and we do well to recognize that empty place inside of ourselves and look at the bad news, vis a vis the body, and to let go and take leave.

SB: How is it different regionally? And can you distinguish between time and place changes, as you, you know, have been in this area so long?

MH: Well, as I describe where we are in Durham, like many of the cities in the New South [laughs], we are in a community of layers. There are more layers on top of the native people. In the almost 25 years that I've been here, we have so many new arrivals of generations—the X-gens, the millennials, people who come here to retire. And so the families we're serving still would include our core people, who are multigenerational, whose funeral patterns are mostly in keeping with the patterns of the past—where they will have a, quote-unquote, more traditional funeral, let's say. Then we have these new layers, and within those layers are Asians, and people of Hindu faith or Buddhist faith, many more Roman Catholics than we had before, who've relocated from the likes of Jersey and Chicago and places northward. So we are having to become conversant in a lot of those traditions. But when I came here in '92, funerals were very predictable. We pretty well knew that on the third day we were going to have a funeral, and we had to hop to it, once we were notified on the phone, to get things moving and get the notice in the newspaper and, you know, get all those things going. We did a lot more rural funerals back then. If you went out from Durham—for example, Oxford, where we have a funeral home, 30 miles from here—you do a lot more of the rural burials, where we locate the sexton of the cemetery, and he might be someone who has known these

families, and without even looking at his little rough-hewn notebook [laughs], he'll know exactly where Aunt Myrtle is supposed to be buried, through his familiarity with the families. And so we run the gamut.

SB: When you're working with a family who's not connected to the place, who doesn't have a family plot in the cemetery or anything like that—

MH: Sure.

SB: —do you find yourself having to take on a lot of the roles that that person's, say, home church, might have provided, if they were living in their own community?

MH: Yes. I mean, added to that, Sarah, would be the fact that many people we're dealing with today have no church community of any kind. And so they don't have the, say, the faith community resources that many of our people here have, and that sort of marshals everyone coming out of the woodwork. In addition to an extended family, you might have a church family. They're going to bring food, and they're going to provide all manner of nurturing. We're dealing with here many people who might not have a faith community, and so, as they think about how they're going to honor and celebrate the life of this person, they're leaning on us to be resourceful, to find a somebody who can be a celebrant, let's say, for that funeral ceremony. We do it in some cases, I've done it a for number of funerals and continue to. Usually what I do is act more as an emcee; and so we'll have participating family members who might speak, or friends, and we've got, you know, all sorts of high-tech things such as videography and the ability to produce all kinds of lovely printed materials, and do photo montages to help people have—or food and beverage, whatever it might be—to have something that's unique, and that's not the sort of traditional kind of funeral with the casket and flowers and so forth. We might have a lot of different, newer elements to tell this life story, and to bring people together around food and beverage, for example.

SB: Food is such a sort of archetypal thing to gather around, as humans.

MH: It is, that's right.

SB: I was looking at the website last night, and at the obituaries of the people you've served, and was really struck by exactly this range of backgrounds you're talking about, how some—

[Recording ends]